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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern

Statement submitted by the World Veterans Federation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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The World Veterans Federation (WVF) is pleased to bring to the attention of the Commission several resolutions passed by its twenty-second General Assembly (10-15 November 1997) in Seoul, Republic of Korea, which address the focal points of the current session: human rights, violence against women, women in armed conflict, and the girl child.

WVF, founded in 1950 by war veterans and war victims, today has over 27 million members located in 74 countries on every continent. Recognizing that war and armed conflicts can affect women differently than men, in 1984 WVF created a Standing Committee on Women to focus on the situation of women in armed conflicts. It provided considerable input to the drafting of the Beijing Platform of Action on relevant critical areas of concern.

Unhappily, the numbers of women and children affected by armed conflicts is increasing. In the past decades, the casualties among civilians from local ethnic conflicts and civil wars outnumber those of the combatants. The civilian casualties are mostly women

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and children. They include war disabled, mine victims, refugees and internally displaced widows and orphans, unaccompanied children, wives of disabled, internees of concentration and labour camps, raped and sexually exploited women. This development prompted WVF at its Sixth International Conference on Legislation (Lisbon, March 1994) to amend its *Guidelines to Basic Rights for War Veterans and Victims of War*, to respond to the needs of the steadily increasing numbers of the resulting civilian victims of war, especially women and children.

We especially call your attention to resolution 28 (see annex) which identifies the tragic situation of the "comfort women" of World War II, who over 50 years after the end of that war have not received reparations or justice. During the 1930s and 1940s, as Japan engaged in massive armed aggression against nations throughout Asia, hundreds of thousands of women and young girls living in those countries were raped, abused and forced into sexual slavery for years at government-organized "comfort stations". Many of these women died from the harsh treatment; those who survived were physically and emotionally scarred, their expectations for a normal future ruined forever. These crimes against women and girls committed by the Japanese Government were never admitted to by that Government or prosecuted as war crimes after World War II ended.

It was not until 1992, when one of the "comfort women" finally spoke up and revealed her horrible experience that the veil of silence about this atrocity was lifted and the world became aware of the nature and extent of the crimes against women and girls in Asia during the Japanese rampage. Since then, more women have talked about their ordeals and have sought justice. Many human rights groups around the world, including those in Japan, have taken up the cause of the "comfort women", but as yet, that Government has not provided state reparations or apologies to the women concerned.

In 1992, Etsuro Totsuka, a Japanese attorney-at-law, brought the issue of "comfort women" to the attention of the Commission on Human Rights. The Commission's Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, was directed to study the issue. Her 1996 report condemned the Japanese conduct as military sexual slavery which represented a crime against humanity. The report concluded that the Government of Japan had both a legal and moral obligation towards the women kept in military sexual slavery during World War II.

A document put out in June 1995 by the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, *Supplementary explanations of the recommendations on the issue of "comfort women"* forthrightly stated: "... it is absolutely necessary to make reparations immediately, including the payment of monetary compensation to the many so-called comfort women who are extreme examples of violence perpetrated against women. We believe that the resolution of this issue is necessary to eradicate violence against women."

As the Commission deals with the focal points at its forty-second session, we hope that the issue of the "comfort women", who are innocent casualties of war and numbered at least 200,000 throughout Asia, will receive the attention it deserves. Since many are dying or already dead, it is cru al that this violence against young girls and women, which occurred over five decades ago, be recognized by the international community and that the nation involved be pressured finally to make reparations, appropriate apologies and include this sorry story in the history of that period as it educated its children.

Besides the pressure of time to render justice to the now aged women, often in the most dire circumstances, we believe the issue of the "comfort women" has particular relevant to the Commission at this session because it intersects with all four of the focal points under consideration. A large proportion of the women forced into sexual slavery were adolescent

girls, some as young as 13. The sexual and other abuse they suffered, the status of slavery they endured, represented extraordinary violence against their persons. These experiences perpetrated by regular members of armed forces in a time of armed conflict violated the human rights of these girls and women.

Although rape and sexual abuse have often been associated with war, they have usually been random and not officially sanctioned. This instance of the "comfort women" during World War II is especially horrendous because the Japanese Government, through its highest military command, institutionalized the practices of rape and sexual slavery. We urge the Commission at this session to consider this issue in all its dimensions.

Annex

Resolutions adopted by the World Veterans Federation at its twenty-second General Assembly

Resolution 25. Victims of war and human rights

The 22nd General Assembly,

1. Noting that under the leadership of the International Committee of the Red Cross, which held an International Conference for the Protection of War Victims in 1993, the international community has concluded that more civilians, mostly women and children, are casualties of current armed conflicts than combatants;

2. Recognizing that the WVF has addressed the difficult circumstances and problems of this large population numbering in millions by including them in its revised *Guidelines to Basic Rights for War Veterans and Victims of War* and in numerous resolutions, including resolution 2, "Assistance to new victims of war", of the 21st General Assembly (Bordeaux, 1994);

3. Considering that 1998 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in which the basic human rights of women were affirmed;

4. Considering also that the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), in which the WVF participated and also sent good wishes (resolution 13 of the 21st General Assembly held in Bordeaux, 1994), reaffirmed the human rights of women throughout its Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration: "We affirm our commitment to: ... Ensure the full implementation of the human rights of women and of the girl child as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms";

5. Calling attention to the fact that the WVF Standing Committee on Women, since it was formed in 1983, has been actively making the case to the United Nations and the rest of the international community that this large population of women and children, civilian victims of war and war victims, has not received adequate attention and assistance;

6. Observes with satisfaction that the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women has designated "women in armed conflicts" as one of its twelve critical areas of concern; and furthermore, that "women in armed conflict" will be one of the four themes to be focused on at the 1998 meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women;

7. Extends good wishes to the Commission in its study of this large group of victims of war and urges the WVF Standing Committee on Women to participate actively in the 1998 session and other relevant United Nations meetings;

8. Furthermore, supports the Optional Protocol to the important human rights instrument, the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women, which will be reviewed at the 1998 session of the Commission, which would allow individuals and groups the right of petition, thereby enhancing the protection of the human rights of women;

9. Urges the WVF next year through its Standing Committees and member associations to celebrate fully and appropriately the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as to commemorate all the other key international instruments that protect and enhance human rights for all persons.

Resolution 26. Children in armed conflicts

The 22nd General Assembly,

1. Noting that the United Nations report on the impact of armed conflict on children (the "Machel report", A/51/306) gives full details of the abuse and exploitation of millions of children during armed conflicts today and that they represent half of the new civilian victims of war, who suffer devastating, long-lasting, possible lifetime effects of those war experiences and;

2. Noting further that the report reveals the widespread forced recruitment of children under the age of 18, mostly boys but including some girls, into military service which often results in these children actually taking part in the fighting and sometimes in atrocities;

3. Noting also that the report calls for a "global campaign" to eradicate this practice and urges the international community to join in this effort,

4. Observing that the report clearly demonstrates that girl children are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation and gender-based violence during armed conflicts or in flight from conflicts;

5. Observing further that the report makes specific recommendations as to how the international community should address these many instances of violence against girl children, including rehabilitative treatment and prosecution of rape as a war crime;

6. Noting also that the report covers the many threats that conflicts make to the survival, health and well-being of children — by land mines, as well as the terrible displacements that armed conflicts cause, creating millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, more than half of whom are children;

7. Observing that many nations have not yet singed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which does not permit most of the abuses described in the report;

8. Further noting that the report calls for revising the Convention through an optional protocol, to raise the minimum age for military service to 18;

9. Recalling recommendations 33, 34 and 35 from the WVF Sixth Legislation Conference in Lisbon in 1994 which addressed the protection and welfare of children during and after armed conflicts;

10. Urges the member associations to urge their Governments to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child and also to support the optional protocol which would change the minimum age for military service to 18;

11. Calls upon the Executive Board, the Standing Committees and the member associations to review the above-mentioned report and its recommendations to see how they can contribute to the protection of children during armed conflicts;

12. Further urges the Executive Board to explore how the WVF can join with other non-governmental organizations, within the framework of Untied Nations initiatives, in an international campaign to protect children from the dire consequences of armed conflicts and to mitigate the long-term negative results of their experiences during armed conflicts.

Resolution 27. "Comfort women" of World War II

The 21st General Assembly,

1. Referring to resolution 18, "Violence against women", which the WVF Council adopted in Taipei in 1993, and the WVF's abiding interest in lessening and eliminating the violence against women that occurs when war breaks out;

2. Noting with deep sympathy the sufferings of the thousands of Asian "comfort women" who were captured, incarcerated and forced into sexual slavery on an organized basis in occupied territories in Asia before and during World War II, and whose sufferings have been brought to public attention in recent years;

3. Considering that substantial evidence and testimony exists about the extent and nature of this sexual slavery and that its victims should be offered a full apology and receive appropriate reparations;

4. Noting with satisfaction that the United Nations has seriously begun to address this issue of violence against women, that the Secretary-General has appointed a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women for the Commission on Human Rights, and that the General Assembly has adopted a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women;

5. Considering the comprehensive work of WVF's Standing Committee on Women, which has been addressing the issue of sexual violence against women during armed conflict, in part by organizing a special session on rape in armed conflicts at the meeting of the Standing Committee on European Affairs in Istanbul in 1993;

6. Recalling the moving presentation made by the Philippine delegate at the meeting of the Standing Committee on Women in Lisbon earlier this year regarding Philippine women's experiences as "comfort women";

7. Appeals to the Government concerned to respond fully to these allegations and to make appropriate reparations to the surviving "comfort women";

8. Further urges the Executive Board and the Standing Committee on Women to continue their work in this area;

9. Calls upon member associations to urge their Governments to support the efforts of the Philippine Government and other Governments to seek justice for World War II "comfort women" of Asia within and outside the United Nations,

Resolution 28. Human rights of women in wartime

The 22nd General Assembly,

1. Recalling resolution 27, adopted by the 21st General Assembly, regarding the "comfort women" of World War II;

2. Condemning all violations of the human rights of women in situations of armed conflict;

3. Noting the steps taken by the authorities concerned in recognizing the crimes committed against those victims who were forcibly mobilized as military sexual slaves, especially in the Asian region, and the need for compensation for the victims;

4. Noting that the women in question are getting older and have serious medical and financial problems, and that, furthermore, many are dying;

5. Considering that the victims feel that they have still not regained their honour and dignity as human beings and that the measures taken until now do not meet all their expectations suitably;

6. Strongly urges the authorities involved to urgently pursue their action with a view to fully meeting these expectations;

7. Expresses the hope that in the near future all the countries in the world will have to participate and seek proper and effective responses through the United Nations and specialized agencies and the international non-governmental organizations concerned to eliminate the violation of the rights of women in war time, emphasizing the need for appropriate systems and special compensation for the victims;

8. Further urges the Executive Board, the Standing Committee on Women and the member associations to continue their efforts to seek justice for the "comfort women".